

Empower the Voters

The arguments for dumping your present First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) voting system are overwhelming. Your election results provide glaring examples of the distortions and instabilities that are the hallmarks of FPTP wherever it is used. It is less obvious, but at every one of these elections about half of those who voted will be left with no representation in your legislature. None of this should be acceptable in a modern democracy. We do know how to better. We no longer have the excuse of near-universal illiteracy (“X” *James Gilmour – his mark*). So FPTP must go. It has no merits that could possibly outweigh its faults and corrosive political effects.

If your aim is to elect a **representative** Legislature, you must use a system of Proportional Representation (PR). There are many systems of PR, but in reality you have only one very simple choice. Is your aim to secure proportional representation of registered political parties **or** is your aim to secure proportional representation of the voters? Do you wish to entrench the power of the political parties **or** do you wish to empower the voters? This is a very simple choice, but it has very far-reaching consequences for the representation of the citizens of British Columbia and for politics in your Legislature.

If you want only to secure PR of registered political parties, there is wide range of party PR voting systems available. Although they differ in detail, all these party PR voting systems have one common objective: to secure PR of political parties. Some of these systems offer the voter some choice among the candidates nominated by one party, but that choice is restricted. One serious consequence is that only by chance will most of these systems give proportional representation **within** the parties. It is common experience that the diversity of views within parties can be as important politically as the diversity of views among parties.

If you want to secure PR of the views of the voters, you have only one choice – to use the Single Transferable Vote system of Proportional Representation (STV-PR), also known as “Choice Voting”. STV-PR is uniquely different from **all** other systems of PR: its objective is to secure PR of the views of the voters. PR of the political parties will be the outcome of an STV election when that is what the voters want, but “party PR” is never the objective of STV. Unlike the party PR voting systems, STV is centred on the voters and the candidates. In contrast, party PR voting systems are centred on the registered parties. This difference determines the fundamental balance of power within the political system. Some political parties and some established politicians do not want to see STV-PR introduced, but that is because they do not want the balance of power shifted from the parties in favour of the voters.

To secure proportional representation you must elect together several members from within the same constituency, ie you must use multi-member constituencies. The numbers of members elected together [“district magnitude”] will determine the degree of proportionality obtained. This applies to all PR voting systems, but all too often commentators confuse the effects of district magnitude with the effects of different PR voting systems. With the same district magnitude, all PR systems will give similar results *in terms of the degree of PR obtained*.

The greater the number of members elected together, the greater will be the proportionality of the result. There is, however, an important trade-off between proportionality of representation and localness of representation. At one extreme, all 79 MLAs could be elected from one province-wide constituency. But that is neither desirable nor necessary. Completely acceptable proportionality can be obtained from much smaller constituencies. For example, the 108 members of the Northern Ireland Assembly are elected by STV-PR from 18 constituencies, each of which returns six members. A very satisfactory degree of proportionality is obtained and each part of the Province elects its own local representatives who reflect the diversity of views within the local electorate.

Where the density of population varies quite markedly within a country or province, STV-PR can be implemented more flexibly to reflect local conditions and to respect the boundaries of existing "natural" communities. There is sometimes an obsession with equalising all the variables that can be varied when devising a multi-member scheme for STV-PR, including the numbers of elected members per constituency and the numbers of electors per elected member. But there is more to equality of representation than equalising these numbers. In any case, variations in turn-out in the elections will make nonsense of the extreme effort often put into the quest for such equalness. In Northern Ireland turnouts in STV elections have varied by 25% between constituencies and there is a strong correlation between party support and turnout. It is thus pointless putting all the emphasis on equalness of numbers when devising the scheme of multi-member constituencies. Good examples of flexible implementations of STV-PR that took account of local needs and circumstances can be seen in the constituency schemes devised for the District Councils in Northern Ireland and for the Scottish Education Authorities. For full details see this Briefing Note (PDF 172 KB): <http://www.fairsharevoting.org/Implementing%20STV-PR%20-%20Paper%20for%20SP%20LGC%201%20Dec%2002.pdf> .

Whenever there is a proposal to change from FPTP with single-member constituencies to a PR voting system with multi-member constituencies, great play is made of the link between the elected member and the electorate within the single-member constituency. It is said that introducing multi-member constituencies will break this vital link. Be aware that many who advance this argument are, in reality, just opponents of reform who fear they and their party will lose out if local voters are represented fairly. Surveys at all levels of government have repeatedly shown that the alleged link between the elected member and the electorate of a geographically defined single-member constituency is much weaker than the elected members would wish us to believe. In contrast, the introduction of STV-PR would strengthen the link between the elected members and their local electorates.

This may seem a paradox: how could the change to multi-member constituencies possibly strengthen the local link? But it is a fact, as politicians elected by STV-PR in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland will testify. It comes about because of the power that STV uniquely gives to the voters to choose their representatives. With STV-PR each elected member is elected because he or she obtained the support of a personal constituency of voters. Those voters voted that member in and they can just as easily vote that member out at the next election *without having to vote against their preferred party*. That greatly increases the accountability of the elected members to their local electorates. By empowering the voters in this way, STV-PR creates stronger local links than exist within geographically defined single-member constituencies.

There will always be a need for voter education when any significant change is made to the voting system. From the voter's perspective, STV-PR is extremely simple. When STV-PR was re-introduced in Northern Ireland in 1973, the Government carried out a campaign of voter education by leaflet, advertisement, radio and television, all with the theme "PR is as easy as 1, 2, 3 ...". Observations made on polling day and at the subsequent counts showed that this campaign had been highly effective. There will also be a need for education for Returning Officers and their staffs. There is now a great deal of practical experience of STV-PR elections available to assist in this task.

The Scottish Parliament decided in June 2004 to replace the FPTP voting system with STV-PR for future elections of councillors to Scotland's 32 Local Authorities. This decision will take effect at the next elections, due in May 2007. The Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004 can be found at:

<http://www.scotland-legislation.hms.gov.uk/legislation/scotland/acts2004/20040009.htm>

The National Assembly of Wales is currently elected by MMP (the Mixed Member Proportional voting system, known in the UK as the Additional Member System, AMS). In March 2004 the independent Richard Commission on the Powers and Electoral Arrangements of the National assembly of Wales published its report. The Commission recommended that MMP (AMS) should be replaced by STV-PR. See:

<http://www.richardcommission.gov.uk/content/template.asp?ID=/content/finalreport/index-e.asp>

The Secretary of State for Scotland has recent set up a Commission on Boundary Differences and Voting Systems to look at the problems arising from the use of four different voting systems within Scotland for different levels of public election. One of the main reasons why this Commission has been set up is widespread dissatisfaction with many aspects of the MMP (AMS) voting system currently used to elect MSPs to the Scottish Parliament. There is a very strong move to have MMP replaced with STV-PR.

The Citizens of British Columbia should take note of what is happening in the home of First-Past-The-Post. At long last, we are moving into a new age of democracy when the voters will be empowered by a voting system that puts them at the centre of the process of choosing their representatives.

James Gilmour

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